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Economic and environmental questions: functioning of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, including its role in coordinating science and technology for development

Proposals for strengthening the coordination of the mechanisms on the Commission on Science and Technology for Development within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development with the objective of promoting complementarity of activities within the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

Contents

		Paragraphs	*Page*
I.	Introduction	1–3	2
II.	Coordination of work in the area of science and technology and role of the Commission	4–8	2
III.	Building an electronic network and information exchange system	9–14	3
IV.	Need for new regular budget resources	15–16	5

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 54/201, entitled "Science and technology for development", the General Assembly endorsed the relevant resolutions and decisions adopted by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1999 on the basis of the report of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on its fourth session; recognized the role of the Commission in coordinating the activities of the United Nations system in the area of science and technology for development; emphasized the importance of the activities that are to be pursued within the framework of the Commission, including a broad spectrum of new global challenges in science and technology; and encouraged support for those undertakings.

2. The Secretary-General was requested to submit to the General Assembly for consideration at its fifty-fifth session, through the Economic and Social Council, without prejudice to the periodicity of this item, proposals for strengthening the coordination of mechanisms on the Commission within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in order to ensure coordination of the various efforts and activities in the area of new and innovative technologies, in particular information and communication technologies, and their applications, such as electronic commerce, with the objective of promoting complementarity of activities within the United Nations system. The present report has been prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat in response to that request.

3. The present report summarizes previous discussions by the Commission on the issue of coordination. It also reviews initiatives taken by various bodies in the United Nations system in order to establish electronic networks as a means to achieve coordination in the area of science and technology policy. The report concludes with a proposal to set up a knowledge and technology for development network, and points out the need for adequate resources to make it work effectively.

II. Coordination of work in the area of science and technology and role of the Commission

4. Since its establishment in 1992, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development has paid particular and continuous attention to the issue of coordination. The issue of coordination and cooperation in science and technology within the United Nations system was addressed for the first time by the Commission at its first session, in April 1993. After its deliberations, the Commission expressed the view that the objective of system-wide coordination in science and technology should be to create synergies. The subject of coordination was raised again by the Commission at its subsequent sessions as well as by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive sessions. In reviewing the science and technology-related activities reported by the agencies of the United Nations system, the Commission noted that the possibilities for overlapping mandates and programmes could not be excluded. In that respect, the Commission considered that the purpose of coordination should be to promote the complementarity of the various activities while avoiding duplication as much as possible.

5. At its fourth session, in May 1999, the Commission stressed that the role of coordinator within the United Nations system has always been and will continue to be a complicated task. As the coordinator of science and technology activities within the United Nations system, the Commission submits its recommendations to the Economic and Social Council, of which it is a functional body. The Council in turn reviews and transmits these to the General Assembly and to other United Nations organizations and agencies dealing with science and technology issues. As an indispensable component of development, science and technology is rapidly becoming a prominent feature in all aspects of development activities. The Commission should seek more inter-agency interaction not only to fulfil its mandate as coordinator of science and technology activities more effectively but also to provide leadership and direction in this area. The effectiveness of the Commission has been enhanced recently, with continuous communication between its secretariat, its Bureau and Commission experts during the inter-sessional period. The Commission's work on gender, information and communication technology

and biotechnology has been coordinated by working groups and panels on specific issues related to the main substantive themes selected by the Commission. Greater efforts should be undertaken to ensure that the results of these working groups and panels are fully taken into account by the sessions of the Commission.

6. In order to enhance the Commission's role as science and technology coordinator, steps should be taken to encourage the participation of United Nations organizations in its various panels. In addition, further sessional reports on substantive agenda items could include an entry on related or similar activities within the United Nations system. The Commission can play its role as a coordinator by assisting countries in formulating research and development policies, for instance.

7. In considering its role and activities regarding coordination at its fourth session, the Commission felt that it could best enhance its role as coordinator by demonstrating leadership in the area of science and technology for development. Therefore, the themes chosen for its inter-sessional periods should be useful and timely. To that end, on the recommendation of the Commission, the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1999/61, (a) urged the secretariat of the Commission to continue its efforts, in collaboration with other United Nations bodies, including regional commissions and the Open-ended Working Group on Informatics, to establish an electronic network linking information on their activities in science and technology for development; (b) requested the secretariat to continue to issue the regular newsletter updating activities in the United Nations system pertaining to science and technology for development, including information on plans for and the results of the inter-sessional activities of the Commission itself; (c) called on the secretariat and Bureau of the Commission to identify and take advantage of opportunities to interact closely with bodies of the United Nations system in order to promote greater information exchange and coordination of activities in science and technology for development; such interactions should include participation by the secretariat in the relevant coordination meetings of the Consultative Committee on Substantive Questions (Operational Activities); (d) recommended that every other year a panel meeting be held in Geneva, following which the Bureau should meet the Geneva-based delegations of member States and observers for one day to discuss with delegations the status of the inter-sessional activities of the Commission and its efforts to coordinate activities of the United Nations system pertaining to science and technology for development; and (e) agreed to keep an item on the agenda of the Commission entitled "The functioning of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, including its role in coordinating science and technology for development", and requested its secretariat to prepare a succinct analytical report on relevant activities within the United Nations system, including the outcome of the World Conference on Science and Technology, for consideration under this item.

8. With respect to paragraph 7 (d) above, the meeting of the Bureau of the Commission and the UNCTAD secretariat with the representatives of the Geneva-based delegations of member States and observers is scheduled to take place in Geneva during the Commission's second panel meeting on biotechnology, from 3 to 5 July 2000.

III. Building an electronic network and information exchange system

9. The UNCTAD secretariat has taken steps to establish electronic linkages as part of its own dissemination activities. Two Internet discussion groups on science and technology were established in 1999. The first, at *CSTD@topica.com*, is open to members of the Commission and the UNCTAD secretariat in order to exchange information on the ongoing inter-sessional work. The second, at *STD@topica.com*, is a discussion list open to all people interested in science and technology for development. Most members of the Commission participate in the first list, while many more people and some Commission members subscribe to the second list.

10. UNCTAD has also been involved in other attempts to establish electronic networks in the field of science and technology for development. One such initiative was taken in 1997 by the members of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs (EC-ESA), namely, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Economic and Social

Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), UNCTAD, the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs, the United Nations Office at Vienna, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the United Nations University. The aim of these networks was to establish a centralized information exchange system on various themes, including technology.

11. As a follow-up to the EC-ESA initiative, EC-ESA members were advised to designate their own focal points for implementing the information exchange system. A coding scheme was then jointly developed to classify all technology-related activities. EC-ESA decided on 15 January 1998 in New York that the development of a system of information exchange should be centralized in a single agency remaining decentralized in its future update. Each member agency would maintain its own inputs in the database and the central web site connected to the database. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs was chosen to be the lead agency and its evolving Integrated Meeting and Documentation Information System (IMDIS) database was chosen as the starting point. It was suggested that technology-related activities to be included in the database should be the following activities funded through the regular budget: reports, meetings, workshops and technical cooperation projects. It was afterwards recommended that IMDIS should be expanded to include more data on science and technology than it was initially designed to contain. For instance, projects financed through extrabudgetary resources should be included.

12. The other initiative for setting up an electronic network came from the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). At its most recent session on 25 April 2000, ACC issued a draft statement on information technology (IT) and development. It was then reaffirmed that information technology was a critical development tool for the United Nations system in advancing the development goals emanating in part from the global United Nations conferences of the 1990s. The executive heads committed themselves collectively to inject new impetus to collaborative action by the United Nations organizations and agencies in this critical area. They emphasized that the United Nations system should place the main focus on developing a knowledge-sharing and learning culture rather than information technology alone. They considered that it was knowledge and learning capacity rather than investment in physical capital alone that would increasingly determine development outcomes. United Nations agencies needed to become "agencies of learning", which would require a comprehensive and coordinated system-wide approach to building an effective knowledge acquisition and dissemination capacity. The executive heads proposed, *inter alia*, organizing a system-wide community of IT experts and users through innovative networking arrangements, as a system-wide resource facility and consultancy service for information on options, costs, good practices, and emerging developments, for use by organizations of the United Nations system for their IT needs and for operational activities for development.

13. One way to respond efficiently and in a forward-looking manner to the General Assembly request, to the various needs mentioned above and to the mandates of the tenth session of UNCTAD and the vision by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD to make the institution a knowledge-based organization is to establish a knowledge and technology for development network both internally (via the Intranet) and externally through the setting up of and inter-linkage of relevant United Nations bodies system-wide. The aim of the network would be to improve:

(a) Information-sharing, by providing access to the latest and relevant information on science and technology for development as well as linkage to information on science and technology activities of relevant United Nations bodies, including the regional commissions;

(b) Knowledge-diffusion, by providing information and identifying best practices with respect to mechanisms, strategies and channels needed to promote technology transfer, diffusion and adaptation and capacity-building. News and reports containing information and case studies on science and technology would be posted in the form of on-line documents;

(c) Generation of ideas by getting feedback on how to enhance the capability of UNCTAD and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development to address relevant issues in the field of science and technology for development.

14. In practice, that would mean that UNCTAD would progressively establish various databases, beginning with one on a specific area of science and technology, such as current policies on biotechnology and their transfer or diffusion (this would create synergies with the ongoing inter-sessional work of the Commission on the theme "National capacity-building on biotechnology"). As experience is gained in managing such a network, more themes would be covered while giving priority to the topics of interest to the Commission. Ultimately, the network would involve all topics on the agenda of the international community in the field of science and technology. Participants in the network would include members of the Commission, policy makers, international and regional organizations, researchers, non-governmental organizations and civil society. The proposal by the firm Yet2.com to cooperate with UNCTAD in technology information diffusion for technology transfer purposes is a timely opportunity to exploit. Yet2.com provides information on-line on thousands of technologies available for transfer worldwide.

IV. Need for new regular budget resources

15. For the above network to be well designed, to function efficiently and to have a visible impact on the coordination of science and technology activities within the United Nations system and on development in general, there is a need for additional resources to be allocated to the UNCTAD secretariat to create, design, implement and operate the above network and information exchange systems. Current staff do not have either the time or the necessary technical skills.

16. Finally, there is a need to attend important substantive meetings as well as have a coordination meeting. In fact, as has been stated above, the objective of coordination of the United Nations-wide work on science and technology necessitates regular meetings of the representatives of secretariats of various United Nations organizations, as well as a more active participation of such representatives in the work, particularly expert meetings of each organization on specific themes related to science and technology. One of the major impediments to strengthening inter-agency cooperation and coordination is the lack of sufficient resources at disposal of the United Nations organizations to send their representatives to such meetings. With that in mind, it would be important, for the sake of strengthening coordination mechanisms, for the respective organizations to earmark budgetary resources to that end. The General Assembly may wish to take a decision on these resource matters.